Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554

In the Matter of	)	
Lifeline and Link Up Reform and	)	WC Docket No. 11-42
Modernization	)	
Lifeline and Link Up	)	WC Docket No. 03-109
Federal-State Joint Board on	)	
Universal Service	)	CC Docket No. 96-45
Advancing Broadband Availability	)	
Through Digital Literacy Training	)	WC Docket No. 12-23
	)	
	)	

**WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REPLY COMMENTS IN RESPONSE TO THE
FEBRUARY 6, 2012 FURTHER NOTICE OF PROPOSED RULEMAKING
REQUESTING COMMENTS ON DIGITAL LITERACY TRAINING**

The West Virginia Department of Education oversees 55 County school districts and two state school districts in the state of West Virginia. These schools exist within both rural and urban areas of the state and are composed of a variety of poverty levels.   Out of the total 283,237 students enrolled in our state's schools, the population of needy students under the National School Lunch Program is 149,445 (*WVEIS 2011-2012 All Grade Levels, All Schools Percent Needy Report).* This means that 52.76% of our student population statewide qualifies for free or reduced lunch.   Because of this great need, it is obvious how important the E-rate program is to our schools and communities, as we educate the students who are our future.

We realize this great need with regard to instruction, not only for our students, but for the community as well, in improving the education of all for employment in this global economy. The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) applauds and supports the FCC's educational goal of increasing digital literacy and for recognizing the value that the community-at-large holds for not only digital information, but life-long learning. The WVDE agrees that by reducing the digital literacy skills gap, training programs could help consumers – in particular, low-income Americans, who have not yet adopted broadband to gain the necessary digital skills. The FCC is to be commended for wanting to have more home adoption of broadband use. Educators, implementing a 21st century curriculum, understand this need probably more than anyone else. Therefore, the real results will be realized when, and only when, the access is available and affordable for homes. As part of our 21st Century Skills initiative, digital literacy has been integrated not only throughout our curriculum for students in grades PK-12, and staff through professional development, but also as part of a relevant and critical component of our Career Technical and Adult Education programs. Adults who return to become educated in basic skills, job skills and technical vocations, also receive embedded digital literacy through the educational programs provided.

The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE), a state entity that (1) has training and professional development embedded in most aspects of all WVDE activities and (2) has worked with the E-rate

program for and with all districts since the beginning and the following comments are provided in response to the FCC seeking suggestions regarding the implementation of digital literacy training. These comments are based on collective expertise, research, best practices and common sense. As a result, we support the comments initially submitted by EdLiNC and the WVDE proposes the following in regard to the digital literacy FNPRM:

1. Keep digital literacy out of E-rate. The program should reside within Lifeline/Linkup (low-income). The latest demand estimate proves E-rate cannot support the addition of any eligible services or programs. The Schools and Libraries Division of USAC is already laden with the E-rate program applications and related tasks. While the administration supports transparency, the comingling of funds and polluting the ESL with previously ineligible services and goods makes no sense!
2. The program should not impose an 80/20 limit respectively to libraries and schools.
3. Why exclude current programs that are working? The new programs only requirement is short sighted. Expansion of existing programs makes more sense fiscally, as well as, in regards to the resulting program being most efficacious. Starting from scratch is a waste of money.
4. Education is the expert in curriculum development. Why reinvent the wheel if it is economically irresponsible to spend more money to replace existing programs that work when these could more logically be expanded? Schools are already familiar with the phrase that applies…. "*Supplement*, **not** *supplant*!"
5. Partnerships are key. Funds need <u>not</u> go to a library when a school could legitimately serve *better* in that scenario. The ALA comments reflect this same opinion. Libraries, telecommunications providers (who ultimately are benefitting from broadband expansion!) and schools should work *together*! Collaboration is natural and has worked historically with schools and libraries.
6. A cap per site will create ineffective programs. Some smaller sites don't need the suggested amount; some larger sites, it would not be sufficient. In its current form, the proposed project would be an inefficient use of funding.

Discussion

1. **Keep digital literacy out of E-rate.** On Friday, April 20th, USAC released their 2012 demand estimate. The amount is estimated at $5.237 billion (only the second time in the program's history that it has reached this level). This amount is up by $927 million from funding year 2011. Priority 1 requests have increased by 12.5% and Priority 2 by 30.7% since 2011. While USAC hopes that the demand can be reduced and funds can be rolled over from unused requests, this signals the beginning of problems that were long-predicted. As broadband demand increases and deployment increases, requests for funding will exponentially increase. Now more than ever we realize that this is no time to put any additional drain on the E-rate program. Currently, the neediest of schools at the 90% discount rate have historically been *guaranteed* funding, but this year *may* be the first exception. The schools at lower discount rates have time and time again been left out of Internal Connections, Priority 2 funding. By adding to the eligible services, this would not only damage the ability to keep out new goods and services, but put a strain on the critical infrastructure that is necessary to ensure high bandwidth can traverse successfully within the schools. The infrastructure and telecommunications are **both** integral components of making 21st Century instruction work! This need **will increase** with the BTOP broadband installations to anchor institutions and with BTOP middle mile fiber. As a result, the build out to homes should now be more affordable for providers to complete. This build out will increase

availability and should be more *affordable* for home access; therefore, more home adoption will be the result.

We reiterate that the digital literacy program's value is important, but if this project were to be funded from or administered within the E-rate program, it would further cripple an already underfunded program. With the broadband expansion through the BTOP grants nationwide, it is unclear how much additional funding will be requested. This will impact the program in the upcoming years as the 2013 implementation deadline approaches. As high bandwidths are more increasingly available, schools and libraries will be applying for greater bandwidth that comes with an increased cost. Adding eligible services within the E-rate program will worsen this burden, and Internal Connections that have historically only been offered to schools in the 90% discount range will most likely disappear. While these most needy schools have historically been the only locations funded, the Rule of 2 out of 5 years for funding eligibility has not decreased the demand on the fund.

The WVDE believes that providing additional funding for digital literacy training that is free and open to all consumers, for example through programs offered at libraries and schools, could help close that gap by ensuring that all Americans, particularly low-income Americans, can access the benefits of digital literacy training. We believe that Low Income funding of digital literacy training is an effective way to help close the digital literacy gap and thereby increase demand for and the availability of broadband to low-income consumers and others. We believe that we currently are able to ensure that the non-adopters that are targeted are aware of and can access the digital literacy training programs that are established as a result of the Commission providing funding. In this manner, we could expand the existing programs to include additional participants within the training and benefit from an already established and successful program.

As broadband increases, opportunities for less expensive services, like VoIP (Voice over IP) used in conjunction with the high-speed Internet access could potentially reduce the burden on the Low-income fund that expensive copper landlines currently offer. Since this will change the face of the Lifeline program, and the fact that the targeted audience for this implementation, for the most part, would be the eligible recipients of the program, Low Income under the USF program would be the ideal fund to administer the program.

It would be a mistake to have USAC try to operate another program under the Schools and Libraries Division. E-rate has ultimately been a successful program bringing connectivity to the classrooms across the nation. Do not hinder that success by dividing efforts to get E-rate funding out in an expeditious manner, or spend time, effort and funding on a misguided path that will not bring the success anticipated. That success will be found within providing ***availability*** and ***competitive options*** for home access! Duplication of effort and wasted funds is not the intent of the FCC. We encourage you not pursue a program that will have this outcome. Stay the *successful* course of providing real access. The Schools and Libraries division of USAC is already taxed enough with the program that exists. The addition of further eligible services or programs would not only end up with comingling of funds, but would pollute an already substantial Eligible Services List (ESL) by adding previously ineligible services and/or goods. With the Administration supporting transparency, this process makes no sense!

Finally, with the release of the $25 million FCC competition to identify the best ways to increase broadband adoption among low-income Americans, decisions about this proposed FNPRM may

be premature pending the results of the competition that builds on the Connect to Compete Initiative. (Reference: News Release DOC-313824A1)

2. **The program should not impose an 80/20 limit to schools.** We do not believe that an 80%/20% allocation will work for every community. Not every area has public libraries available that can provide these services. This should not be a requirement and should be based on a case-by-case basis, whereby the grant applicants provide a plan that demonstrates how inclusion of libraries', schools' and ETC (telecommunications providers') participation are all considered.
The West Virginia Department of Education finds that there are certain facilities that could best offer digital literacy training. In many cases, existing programs within the Career Technical Education or Adult Education arenas are already providing skills trainings that could be easily and efficiently expanded with the funding available. In some areas this may be the public library, while some schools may be unable to serve the public-at-large due to their responsibility to their students. Not every community has a public library available. Not every public library has the number of computers accessible to have a training course that would be effective. While "just-in-time" training that librarians provide is beneficial and critical to continue, we believe that this service is part of their identified role and this does not qualify as digital literacy training, per se. The impact of the funding would not be justifiable, whereas the funding to train a classroom of students would be funding best utilized. There should be requirements as to the size of the course so that trainings are not provided to one or two individuals. Trainings with a low enrollment should be rescheduled until a time when the class size could be more efficient and cost-effective.

3. **Why exclude current programs that are working? The new programs only requirement is short sighted. Expansion of existing programs makes more sense fiscally, as well as, in regards to the resulting program being most efficacious. Starting from scratch is a waste of money.** We believe that in order for schools to best be utilized, the Community Use Order should be expanded to include adult education and health care staff as eligible users on E-rated school networks. In this way, the school becomes the hub of the community. Families can attend classes in the evening or during the day while their children are in school. Healthcare centers that already reside in the facilities, but are currently utilizing the Rural Healthcare initiative to provide duplicative funding, could offer a more cost-effective opportunity for the USF fund, in general. While we are not suggesting that additional users become a burden on the E-rate fund or a draw on the school's network, healthcare staff numbers are usually limited in number and adult users are generally already receiving services where eligible in the states, but the applicant is cost-allocating the use. Their addition could and should be a *de minimus* burden on the school network and E-rate program. We are <u>solidly</u> against draining the E-rate fund to provide Internet training that is not eligible in the current eligible services list. Since the commencement of the E-rate program, salaries and training of this type have been prohibited. A reasonable addition to the Community Use Order could potentially provide a more logical utilization of USF funds and eliminate duplicative networks and services when a small number of drops or VoIP phone connections traversing the network are all that are required and could be provided without a large investment from the E-rate fund. If the Community Use restrictions were lessened by allowing adult education and digital literacy use of the network during the school day, this could alleviate time limitations that are currently imposed upon the schools—which **<u>may</u>** be the only anchor institution site with labs available in the community.

4. **Education is the expert in curriculum development. Why reinvent the wheel if it is economically irresponsible to spend more money to replace existing programs that work when these could more logically be expanded? Schools are already familiar with the phrase that applies…. "Supplement, not supplant!"** The FCC needs to stay the course of what it does best in working with infrastructure implementations and leave the training to qualified personnel in education. The West Virginia Department of Education believes that targeted, time-limited funding needs to be carefully considered to ensure that funding dollars are not wasted by duplication of efforts. It would be a misuse of funds to develop curriculum that education professionals have already developed or to spend funds for trainers who do not have the expertise that a professional educator would offer. For funding to be released to instructional programs, there should be a plan developed that considers available school and library resources. While we believe that increased, targeted professional development should be offered as part of the digital literacy program, by implementing within the schools and libraries, costs can be better leveraged, since these staff members already receive some additional instruction in technologies that may be more specific to the community-at-large through the professional development requirements in the E-rate program. The ideal digital literacy skills training should integrate job searching, e-government services and financial services within the programs provided. This would not only offer the justification for adoption and subscription to home services, but would also offer the community improved opportunities financially and personally. Through this process, additional professional development costs could be effectively reduced. Ultimately, utilizing the experts already in place will be the most cost-effective route.

   Funding should cover the costs of the school or library and the expert trainer (teacher or librarian), but needs to be competitive with teacher/librarian salaries, depending on the area. Additionally, a consideration not mentioned in the FNPRM was transportation. Individuals who are within the low-income range may not have transportation to attend trainings. This may be something that should be considered as part of the program. The Commission should consider funding spread over time to implement, which would include a minimum of six months of for preparation and development of the instruction and six months for wrap-up and assessment of the project's success. No program worth attending springs up overnight.

5. **Partnerships are <u>key</u>! Funds need not go to a library just for library's sake when a school could legitimately serve better in that scenario. Working with Libraries, Telecomm and Internet providers (who ultimately are benefitting from broadband deployment) and schools should work together! Collaboration is natural and has worked historically with schools and libraries.** Another ideal solution would be to have the ETCs (telecommunications providers) partner with the training sites (schools and/or libraries). They could participate in a variety of ways to provide the trainings and/or pay to cover the costs of the school/library facilities for the training (electricity, water, custodial staff) for that short time period of "rental." We find that while the ideal would be to have the experts—the professional educators--develop the curriculum and provide the trainings, in some locations, teachers or librarians may not be available to provide the services. Each grantee should provide a plan for the implementation of the training services that is provided prior to the start of the program. Within the plan, it should detail the partnerships that would exist with the schools, libraries, ETCs or others. Generally, the most ideal scenario would be that each state would apply for grant funding in a manner similar to what is already familiar to them--Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT). In most

states, the structure has already been in place for years, and the staff already well versed in dealing with federal programs and their unique requirements. This program also included a planning piece that is already familiar to the states. If administrative funding is available for programs, this could afford states the ability to save jobs that would have otherwise been cut as a result of the EETT program not being extended by the US Department of Education. States would need to have a small amount of funding for administration of the program, but this could also afford the FCC an avenue to administer, evaluate and support the project without additionally burdening the Universal Service Administrative Corporation (USAC).

6. **A cap per site will create ineffective programs. Some smaller sites don't need the suggested amount; some larger sites, it would not be sufficient. In its current form, the proposed project would be an inefficient use of funding.** We disagree with the Commission's intent to limit funds to entities that are not already offering formal digital literacy training services. Since programs such as these are already in place in most states, if additional funds were added to _**supplement, not supplant**_, the existing program, this could afford a cost-savings. Curriculum development would not be necessary, since it is already in place. More individuals could benefit from the funding provided. By expanding Community Use in schools, classrooms such as those in vocational centers could offer expanded digital literacy skills trainings during the day. Currently, those offerings would have to be cost-allocated unless they occurred after-hours. We agree that new locations should be added to ensure that all communities have digital literacy available in a locale that is convenient to individuals living there. In order to focus on those that are most needy, the sites should be determined by the community need. The local school's NSLP counts (similar to how the libraries calculate need) could be easily used to calculate the eligibility for need. The communities with the most need should be the ones that are targeted. Communities that have already received BTOP grants for services for the past few years _**should**_ be eligible. Since the BTOP grant won't be completed until 2013, some of the individuals in the community may not have had access to broadband in their home until the 2013 deadline for fiber installations. In that sense, any training that has occurred may have made the attendees more aware of what the Internet can do for them, but the reality of accessing has not yet occurred for them. For that reason, training should have followed the implementation deadlines or sites should have been required to provide training after the community had received services. In that sense, it would not be beneficial to the education of the community to limit eligibility by BTOP training site locations having been in place.

While understanding that implementation within the low-income community would hopefully bring forth more education and job skills for the community, it would be unreasonable to think that those of a certain income level could financially support the full cost of the broadband costs in their home without gainful employment available. In order to facilitate a "hand up," ideally subsidies should be available through the Lifeline and Linkup program to low-income families that install and receive training. _**Subsidies should only be provided to those that have attended trainings provided.**_

Applicants should have to submit training logs quarterly to provide evidence that effective training is being provided and an online certification could be provided. If trainings are not attended regularly, the grantee should have to revise their plan to improve attendance by the next quarter or lose funding.   Both attendance and broadband adoption metrics should be considered, as adoption may be contingent on the skills acquired and income gained through

job-related increases, and may not be immediate.   This data should be collected by a database that not only allows grantees to setup training classes, but also allows the students to validate that training was actually received and instructors to mark that attendance occurred. This would provide a system of checks and balances. Funding should be disbursed quarterly as success is proven, but not in arrears, so that staff may be paid.   The term of the length of training should vary based on the size of the community. In order to reach larger groups, a longer time-period may be required. This should be determined on a case-by-case basis as part of the planning/application process. The length of the program at large should be determined by the success of the project. If the demand is still within the communities and they still show a need, then that determination can be made at that time. There should also be an annual application process with quarterly evaluations to ensure that ineffective programs are not continually funded for multiple years. The filing window for this program should <u>not</u> coincide with the E-rate funding window, so that schools' and libraries' applicants aren't over-taxed in attempting to meet two critical deadlines.

In conclusion, due to the extreme geographical limitations, West Virginia has long been slow to adopt fiber in rural areas. There are areas that have yet to receive fiber in schools, but the BTOP grant should change that. We believe that in addition to being generally higher in low-income population, not having the availability of Internet access has left the rural communities lacking the knowledge of the benefits that the Internet could afford them in the areas of gaining employment and in recognizing the advantages the Internet could bring to their everyday lives. The WVDE anticipates that success will be better realized in utilizing the resources of the Low Income programs to accomplish this goal.

Respectfully submitted by:

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